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## MPs assured pro-people approach to handle issue of 'ecologically sensitive area' in Western Ghats

Vishwa Mohan,TNN | Aug 3, 2015, 07:41 PM IST

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NEW DELHI: The Center on Monday assured MPs from Western Ghats region that the final notification on earmarking 'ecologically sensitive area' (ESA) will incorporate suggestions of all the six states and the 'no go' area will not in any case affect the basic economic activities, including agriculture and plantation, of the people living in the earmarked zone.

A dominant view within the environment ministry is about banning only big mining\construction activities and highly polluting industries within the ESA which is expected to be notified by August

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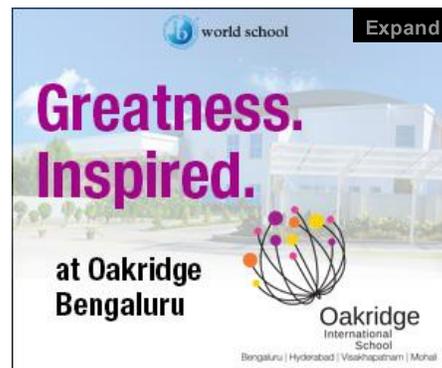
The assurance on "pro-environment and pro-people" conveyed to the MPs by the Union environment and forests minister Prakash Javadekar at a special meeting on the issue here on Monday. The Center will, however, call one more round of meeting with MPs from the region next week before taking a final call on the extent of the ESA to allow basic economic activities.

"Twenty-two MPs expressed their views in the meeting and many other submitted their concerns in writing. We will hold one more round of meeting with MPs where the remaining ones will express their view...This is the most democratic exercise which we are carrying out on the issue of Western Ghats...We will take any decision only after considering suggestions of all the states", said Javadekar.

Referring to suggestions, extended by MPs during the meeting, Javadekar said, "The overall tone was that environment as well as livelihood of the people must be protected. The MPs felt that only big mining activities and highly polluting industries should be banned. They felt that agriculture, plantation and sand mining should be allowed...Everybody talked about sustainable development and sustainable way out".

He said two states, Kerala and Goa, have already submitted their reports (based on physical demarcation and verification exercise on the ground) to the ministry. Four other states - Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat and Maharashtra - will submit their reports in the next couple of days.

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The ministry will take final decision on the ESA after going through all these reports, he added.

The environment ministry called the meeting of MPs in the backdrop of various concerns expressed by the states over the past few months. Though the ministry has, more or less, made up its mind to reduce the proposed 'ESA' by nearly 6,000 sq km, it still keeps option open to reduce the total area further if states insist.

The concept of ESA provides a mechanism to conserve biological diversity of an area while allowing for sustainable development to take place. Once the notification comes into force, the ESA will be a completely 'no go' zone for excessive commercial mining and high polluting industries.

It is expected that 85 types of high polluting activities including setting up aluminum smelter, cement plant, fertilizer factory, glass manufacturing units, zinc smelter, automobile manufacturing units, airports and big hotels (having 100 rooms and above) won't be allowed within the ESA.

It is expected that the total ESA will be reduced to a little over 50,000 sq km from the 56,825 sq km spread over six states -- Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala -- extending over a horizontal distance of about 1,500 km along the west coast.

The Kasturirangan panel, set up under the UPA government, had suggested earmarking 59,940 sq km as the ESA. However considering Kerala's report, the then government had in its March, 2014 draft notification reduced the ESA in the state from 13,108 sq km to 9,993.7 sq km, thereby reducing the entire ESA from original 59,940 sq km to 56, 825 sq km.

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